

Televised Dog Shows a Mixed Blessing

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NOVEMBER 18, 2009, 7:00 P.M. EST

It's a sure sign dog shows on TV have become mainstream when even your "civilian" friends consider the Kennel Club of Philadelphia canine extravaganza on NBC as much a part of Thanksgiving Day tradition as the Macy's parade. Fellow conformation enthusiasts, we have arrived!

For the most part, televised dog shows are a good thing. No longer does the average American think of us as participants in a bizarre, hairsprayed ritual to be lampooned and mocked a la "Best in Show." If viewers aren't signing up to play, they at least now accept the fact that conformation is a legitimate sport. Most enjoy the dogs and find the commentary informative. Prospective dog owners pay particular attention to the breed descriptions and the well-groomed specimens on display.

However, as judges and breeders, we acknowledge the down side of televised shows as well. Judging dogs requires focus; concentration. Having a director talk to you via an earpiece as you go about your task is distracting and can undermine your focus until you learn to compartmentalize. A live broadcast such as Westminster, which requires judges to stop and take commercial breaks, can be especially disruptive.

Knowing their Best of Breed dogs will be performing for the cameras later during the Groups can tempt judges to send the showiest, most glamorous dogs to the winner's circle rather than those that might be more structurally correct but less extroverted. Such judging rewards dogs for the wrong reasons.

Another danger is viewers who catch sight of a "new" or "exotic" breed and decide they must own one without knowing the first thing about it. Restraint is in order. So is research – to see if this eye-catching breed is compatible with one's lifestyle. No responsible breeder will sell a puppy to someone who e-mails them and says they flipped over the breed during its two-minute walkabout on a televised dog show. Unfortunately, an impulsive viewer will surf the 'net and find a commercial breeder who will sell him a dog, no questions asked other than "Visa or Mastercard?"

Televised dog shows bring education and entertainment into our living rooms for which we are grateful. However, they can be every bit as seductive as "Project Runway" and "American Idol." We're not all going to become supermodels and singing sensations, nor are all of us equipped to own a Neapolitan Mastiff or an Otterhound.

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